

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-stiffelman/unplug-and-recharge b 2213654.html>

Fixed in the Broken Islands

To get to the Broken Islands, you fly into Vancouver, and then take a two-hour ferry to Vancouver Island. From there, you drive an hour to Port Albernie where you catch a three-and-a-half-hour ferry ride to to an outpost, rent kayaks, and paddle for several hours until you arrive at a remote island where you can camp. It is a long journey -- one that I took this summer -- and an unforgettable one. The beauty and stillness are stunning. Something about those Broken Islands fixed something in me that made the adventure more of a life-changer than a vacation.

Before heading off to British Columbia, I had been noticing that little by little, my connection to the real, three-dimensional world had been getting whittled down. As months and years go by, my digital devices have become more and more ubiquitous, constantly beckoning me to dive in, causing me lose track of thirst, weariness, even hunger. Screens have infiltrated my life in ways I could not have imagined and have found increasingly difficult to reverse.

What did I do 10 years ago at the end of the day if no one was home and work was done? I might have caught up with a friend over the phone, played piano, or allowed myself to get lost in a good book.

But in recent years, it seems leisure time means plugged-in time. Whether it's catching up on the endless stream of emails, popping by Facebook to check in on my tribe, or looking up something of interest, there's a good chance I'm looking at a screen or two if the house is quiet. Even if I'm watching TV, losing myself in a plot line is often not enough. My laptop is frequently open, always ready to ramp up the stimulation and send a little dopamine rush my way.

In the Broken Islands, that was all from another lifetime. Days were filled with wandering the woods, paddling the bays, and telling long stories around the fire. One day, it rained. Not lightly, or for a little while, but for 40 hours straight -- an unrelenting, torrential rain. I lost track of time, waking in what might have been morning -- it could have been 5:00 a.m., it might have been 11:00 -- and moving through my day one moment at a time.

I stayed in the tent for hours, listening to the rain, dozing, relaxing, reading, meditating, breathing, having no idea what time it was, and no desire to know. I relaxed in a way I can't remember; I felt my mind slow down; felt it stop, and tune in to one breath at a time, one drop of rain on the tarp, one whiff of smoke from last night's fire.

After camp stove chili, I imagined it was the end of the day and readied myself to turn in for the night. (In this part of the world, it stays light out 'til at least 11:00 p.m., making light an altogether useless indication as to what time it might be.) It turned out it was about 3:30 in the afternoon.

When the rain finally stopped, I walked along the shore, water gently lapping, sun peeking through to warm the earth again. Ancient cycles that have gone on forever. Me, a grateful visitor, slowed down enough to be evened out by the realness of it all. Healed by it.

We need that kind of time and quiet -- we all do. We need time in the stillness of nature to become fully engaged with the real world where our senses can be reawakened, pulled out from under the rubble of beeps and alerts and reunited with the elements that are so much of who we are. We need to unplug, beyond just turning our phones off for the duration of a flight, or for an hour or two when we're brave enough to tolerate a brief respite from our screens.

Something inside me was recalibrated in those islands. As lovely as my life is when I'm home, I still move in rhythm with my digital life, and all that comes with that. On the Broken Islands, something got fixed. Even on the ferry rides back to civilization, none of us pulled out our devices. Despite having been unplugged for six days, we sat together telling stories, laughing and sharing the pleasure of human company without succumbing to the pull of our overloaded inboxes.

Thankfully, the "repair" I found in the islands is sticking, at least so far. I find myself sitting for longer stretches by the window, contentedly watching the birds play on the bird feeder, noticing the sweet way the light hits the leaves on the ficus tree. I feel quieter, less engaged in the chase for Something Cool to Happen; more peace.

It is a unique time, this digital era we're in. There are extraordinary opportunities for learning and connecting; so many wonderful things can happen with these devices of ours. But we remain human beings, not human doings, and we mustn't forget to stay tethered to the elements of our natural world. I'm so grateful for those Broken Islands, for the relatively brief chance to fall so far off the grid that I was reminded of the simplicity that makes my heart truly happy.